

Who Can Afford to Live In Duxbury?

By JULIE ORWIG

(This is the first in a two-part series on housing needs in Duxbury.)

John and Mary Duxbury have lived in town for over 40 years. They are hardworking people, dedicated to both family and community. Mary has been both homemaker and secretary at a local doctor's office over the years. She has also been active in PTO and other community projects. John is a past member of the School Committee and owns a small retail business in Braintree. The Duxburys have done well over the years, but as John and Mary approach retirement and a fixed income, they both wonder whether they can afford to remain in the community they have grown to love.

The Duxburys are a fictitious family but their dilemma is not.

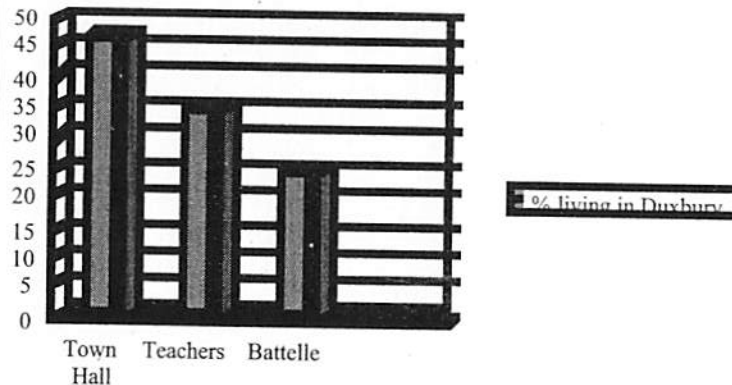
The average price of owning real estate in Duxbury has risen sharply in recent months to almost \$1/2 million! Most of Duxbury's real estate is sold through Plymouth County Multiple Listing Service, and figures from MLS reveal that the average selling (not listing) price for a single-family home sold through MLS was \$421,560 in 1999. In the first seven months of 2000, that

Figures provided by the Superintendent of Schools office show that of Duxbury's 238 teachers, 154 or 65 per cent now reside elsewhere.

Duxbury's second largest employer is Battelle. Human Resource records at this oceanographic research center show that of their 115 employees, only 26 of them actually live in Duxbury, leaving 76 per cent to live in other communities.

While it is difficult to determine one singular reason why people may work in Duxbury, but live elsewhere, still it is safe to assume that economically most of them really have no other choice. According to Kory Bockman, Economist for the National Association of Real Estate Brokers, the Affordability Index is a useful tool to determine just where Duxbury stands as far as providing housing for those who may work and want to live in our town. This index gauges the financial ability of consumers to buy a home. A reading of 100 means that a family earning the national median income has exactly enough money to qualify for a mortgage on a median-priced home. For the U.S. as a whole, the median price of a home is \$139,800 with a qualifying income of \$50,241.

Employees Living in Duxbury



Meeting. Other employees, such as the Town Manager, who earns an annual salary of \$94,416, have negotiated contracts with the Town.) The town's non-exempt hourly employees can earn anywhere from \$6.00 per hour to approximately \$22.00 per hour, with an annual income range of \$12,480 to \$45,972, exclusive of overtime. These would include police officers, firefighters, clerks and laborers.

And so the majority of employees working for the town, the teachers in the school system and scientists and others at Battelle would not qualify as homebuyers in Duxbury.

And what about Duxbury's growing elderly population?

Recent estimates in the Comprehensive Plan, reports that because Duxbury is "a non-urban settlement, it does not feel the pressure for diversified housing that more urban communities experience. Such communities have large employment concentrations within their borders or are commuting suburbs near such centers." They continue - "Duxbury has relatively little economic activity (other than serving local needs) but may increasingly become a commuting suburb (especially as regional transportation facilities are expanded.)"

Duxbury is already a commuting center and in fact, the commuting goes both ways. In greater numbers, low to moderate income people are commuting here to service our com-

strongly motivate the densest possible development. Simply put, the more house lots and the larger the houses that can be squeezed onto a particular plot of land, the more square feet of retail or office space that can be shoe-horned into a neighborhood business district, the more money there is to be made. These are powerful economic incentives."

These dire warnings are aimed at curtailing development and lowering density to preserve the unique character of Duxbury; thus protecting its quality schools, water supply, beaches and other natural resources. As one developer has said, "reduced density simply means larger lots and larger homes driving the price of housing even higher."

Perhaps it is possible to preserve Duxbury's unique qualities while providing more affordable housing to residents.

Stephen Dubuque, Executive Director of South Shore Housing, which provides housing services including regional, non-profit housing development, feels that higher densities may positively impact some communities. "In certain controlled residential developments, higher densities provide the key to more affordable housing," says Dubuque. He

increase of 14%.

Some might say that these figures do not include condominiums and that a person can still own real estate in Duxbury for less. The average selling price of those condominiums sold during the first seven months of this year was \$250,197; and there were only 27 of them as opposed to 226 single-family homes sold during the same period.

One might claim that prospective homeowners may purchase a lot, sub-contract the work, and build their own homes. However, in 1999, there were only eight land sales at an average price of \$203,737; and future owners still had the costs associated with building their new homes. So even if we include land and condominium sales, the average price of owning real estate in Duxbury is still well over \$470,000.

So who can afford to live in Duxbury?

Obviously it is not the people who work for Duxbury's largest employer: the Town. In recent years, fewer and fewer town employees actually live here. Of the 176 employees on the town payroll (exclusive of teachers), only 83 reside in our town and some of these actually live with parents or other family members who own the real estate where they reside. That means 93 employees or 53 per cent live outside the town.

The majority of employees working for the town, the teachers in the school system and scientists and others at Battelle would not qualify as homebuyers in Duxbury.

By comparison, if we consider the single-family homes sold in Duxbury this year, the median price is around \$385,000. With an interest rate of 8.27 per cent and assuming a 20 per cent down payment, that would mean that a prospective buyer would have to earn a net minimum (after taxes) income of \$111,275 in order to qualify for a mortgage on a median priced home. With results of the 2000 Census still being released, we do not know the median income for Duxbury residents.

However, we do know that the salary range for Duxbury teachers is \$30,871 for those holding bachelor's degrees, increasing to a maximum of \$63,638 for doctorates. At Battelle, salaries begin around \$28,000 for entry-level scientists to over \$150,000 for the few top positions.

At the Town Hall, salaried management positions begin at \$35,075 with a maximum salary for the highest position of \$88,657. (These include non-union employees covered under the by-law approved at Town

preprehensive Plan show retiree numbers increasing by 110 per cent by the year 2020. The Housing Authority currently has over 100 applicants on their wait list for apartments at their elderly complex where local residents are given priority for admission to State Aided Housing.

The Housing Authority also administers several other State and Federal assistance programs for low-income families and individuals. The state Chapter 705 program, includes six units, located at scattered sites in Duxbury, and is owned and administered by the Housing Authority for low-income families, who pay 30 per cent of their income for the rental units. The M.R.V.P. or Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program is another state rental program for low-income families and the elderly. Low-income applicants reside in private sector dwellings and the Housing Authority makes monthly payments to landlords on behalf of the tenant. The federally assisted Section 8 program provides a variable rent subsidy where tenants pay 30 per cent of their adjusted gross income for privately owned rental units. The Housing Authority currently reports that all three programs are closed to new applicants.

And yet the Planning Board in its February 1999 final draft of Duxbury's new Comprehen-

like Battelle while higher income groups are sleeping here and commuting to Boston and other metropolitan areas. Is this the sign of a healthy, diversi-

In greater numbers, low to moderate income people are commuting here to service our community and to work at places like Battelle while higher income groups are sleeping here and commuting to Boston. Is this the sign of a healthy, diversified community?

fied community?

In the April 5 edition, the *Clipper* reported that "Boosting affordable housing while reducing "build out" density is one of the challenges facing a new zoning by-law study committee." That committee, assisted by a \$30,000 stipend approved in Article 38 by voters at Town Meeting in 1999, was given the task of deciding how to implement the town's new Comprehensive Plan, thus determining future land-use.

The Comprehensive Plan focuses attention on housing density, and recent discussions by members of the land-use committee have also highlighted this important issue. Creators of the Comprehensive Plan caution that "there are substantial fundamental economic forces at work that

feels that affordability can be achieved through smaller lots, shorter roads, different setbacks and side lines, reducing development costs while preserving open space through common residential ownership.

Some might maintain that Duxbury doesn't really have a density problem. If we compare Duxbury's population of 619 people per sq. mile, we find that it is actually lower than most. For example, Hingham has 955 people per sq. mile, Cohasset has 791 and Scituate has 1079. These three towns still provide quality living environments for residents despite higher densities than Duxbury. By comparison, Plymouth, which is geographically the largest town in the Commonwealth, has only 534 people per square mile, but with many new residential developments in planning stages, density is destined to change in that community.

And change it must, just as Duxbury must change. This community still has some limited growth potential that can be accomplished without threatening the valuable resources that make it unique. More diversified housing options for those who may want to live and work or retire here can be part of that future. How this is accomplished may depend on how well the private sector is able to work effectively with town officials to create that housing diversity.